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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: LOCAL GOVERNANCE THE PRIORITY IN
CULTURAL CAPITAL OF KANDY

REF: COLOMBO 1997

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: During a December 14-15 visit to Kandy, Sri Lanka's cultural and Buddhist capital, emboffs found interlocutors focused on local governance and dedicated to addressing the needs of the communities in the Central Province. Elected officials spoke about working together with their political rivals, as well as the challenges of governing with their Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) colleagues. Christian contacts discussed religious tensions in the region, while elected officials stated that depressed living conditions in certain communities provided a reason for Christian groups to operate. Separately, local officials with the International Organization for Migration reported on their new awareness campaigns among local communities on trafficking issues. End Summary.

Kandy: a refreshing outstation oasis

2. (SBU) During a December 14-15 trip to Kandy, poloff and POL FSN met with a variety of government and civil society interlocutors in Sri Lanka's upcountry cultural capital. Nestled in the mountains on the northern edge of Sri Lanka's tea growing region, Kandy was bustling with local residents and a regular stream of tourists. Despite the town being the heart of Sri Lankan Buddhism -- with its world-renowned Temple of the Tooth and seats of two major Buddhist sects -- several store fronts and hotels were decorated for the Christmas season. With Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim populations, the Central Province -- with Kandy as its capital -- is a microcosm of Sri Lanka in some ways, but enjoys relative ethnic harmony. Interlocutors of varied political persuasions discussed the differences with their political opponents but also the ways in which they worked together.

Muted politics at the local level

3. (C) Compared with southern Sri Lanka, where identification with political parties seems more pronounced, interlocutors in Kandy said that political differences in their province were more muted. Sarath Ekanayake, Chief Minister of the Central Province and a member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), described himself as a "Sinhala Buddhist," but underscored to poloff that he focused on addressing the issues of all Sri Lankans within the region. Making similar comments, D. Mathi Yugarajah, Chairman of the provincial council and member of the Tamil Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), felt that elected officials were working well together. Both men recognized the paucity of resources that had traditionally been directed at the Tamil estate workers -- one of the poorest segments of Sri Lanka society -- and asserted that education was the key to developing this population.

4. (C) Dependent on the national government in Colombo for fiscal resources, the elected officials admitted that resources were never sufficient but said they were trying to allocate funds for the best use. (Note: This is in contrast to elected officials from the South, who had spent much of their time early this year complaining to poloff about their lack of sufficient funds. It should be noted, however, that poloff's attempts to meet several officials from the main opposition United National Party -- who might not speak so glowingly about political harmony in Kandy -- were unsuccessful. End Note.) Ekanayake spoke about plans to develop the local information technology infrastructure to create more education and employment opportunities for local residents.

5. (C) In addition to provincial government officials, emboffs also met with Venerable Udawatte Nanda Thero, a monk MP with the Buddhist extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party. A long-time government servant, Venerable Nanda Thero had been an elected member of the local Kandy municipal council for over a decade before being elected to Parliament in the April 2004 election. He, too, spoke about his efforts to minister to the people of his district and was

particularly proud that he was the highest JHU vote-getter in the entire Central Province in the April parliamentary elections. Venerable Nanda Thero said he was dedicated to preserving the rights of Sinhalese Buddhists for future generations -- see more below.

Governing with the JVP

16. (C) Both Ekanayake and Mathi Yugarajah spoke about their experiences working with the government's main coalition partner, the jingoistic Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). In the 58-member provincial council, elected in July 2004, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) holds 30 seats, including 9 JVP members. Ekanayake said that although the JVP had run -- and won -- the seats under the UPFA ticket, the party members did not always support the government's positions. He indicated that they questioned the reasoning behind every decision, including traditional social events that the council annually hosted. Ekanayake said he found the JVP very certain of its own politics, but naive regarding the wider, more diverse political arena.

17. (C) Mathi Yugarajah also agreed that the JVP was a "top-down" party with provincial council members taking direction -- and stating positions -- directly from its politburo in Colombo. (Note: Mission has directly experienced this "top-down" leadership and poloff generally has to submit any meeting request to the JVP leadership in Colombo. Apparently the JVP MP from Kandy did not receive permission to meet with us, as he had to "go out of town" just moments before our scheduled meeting. End Note.) The Council Chairman also noted that when JVP members introduce a proposal to the council, their colleagues present the same proposal in all the other councils. (JVP members hold seats on all eight elected provincial councils in Sri Lanka.) Both men said their JVP colleagues rarely strayed from their position, even if in the minority, and made little attempt to compromise within the council.

Religious tensions in the cultural capital of Buddhism

18. (C) Similar to other regions in Sri Lanka, Kandy and the Central Province have their share of religions tensions. Local Christian pastors described to poloff the harassment that they and their congregation face from Buddhists in their communities, adding that police were often uncooperative or slow to act. Council Chair Mathi Yugarajah recognized the positive social work that Christian organizations performed in predominantly Buddhist rural communities, but said that these communities' isolation made them susceptible to less genuine (i.e., proselytizing) influences. "There are so many poor Christian communities," he said; "why don't these Christian groups use their resources to alleviate the conditions there?" Surprisingly, Venerable Nanda Thero did not reiterate the familiar extremist rhetoric of his party, but also felt that fundamentalist-type Christian groups take advantage of Buddhists living in poor socioeconomic conditions.

19. (C) Emboffs also met with the Most Venerable Mahanayake Thero, the head of the Asgiriya sect of Buddhism and one of the leading Buddhist clerics in Sri Lanka. In a reassuring discussion -- translated by POL FSN -- the Mahanayake of the Asgiriya chapter expressed concern about "fundamentalist" actions of some Christian groups, but said he was convinced that the issue should be addressed through inter-religious dialogue and not by legislation. He noted a recent meeting among the Catholic Archbishop, the Mahanayake of the Malwatte sect (the other leading Sri Lanka Buddhist cleric), and himself. (Note: The Mahanayake of the Asgiriya chapter's sincerity towards religious tolerance was underscored when, during the meeting, another monk's cell phone went off with a cheery "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" ringtone.)

Local efforts to address trafficking issues

10. (C) Emboffs visited the International Organization for Migration (IOM) regional office in Kandy, established in July 2004. Staff Assistant Jezina Yaheya described the ongoing outreach and awareness activities carried out by the office. Yaheya said the first priority had been to engage local police officials, who were receptive to IOM's efforts to educate them further about trafficking issues. She and the local project officer had also begun awareness campaigns among estate sector workers, educating them about foreign employment agencies specifically. Yaheya said that during one visit, several women complained that an employment agency had taken their passports and money, promising jobs in the Middle East and had disappeared. Under direction from IOM, the workers filed a complaint with the police, who managed to locate the bogus agency officials and retrieve most of the passports. IOM officials plan on continuing outreach and awareness efforts for the present, as well as building an

information network and capacity with local non-governmental organizations.

Comment

11. (C) As the cultural and Buddhist capital of Sri Lanka, Kandy provided a refreshing political and climatic change from Colombo. Interlocutors seemed focused on addressing local issues and working for their constituencies, without being caught up in the personality-riven national politics that dominate discussions in Colombo. Kandy is not without its problems, as officials try hard to represent all ethnic and religious communities. Officials are also focused on significant development requirements of the mainly Tamil communities in the estate sector. Forward progress in the government's ongoing peace process with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam can only help in bringing more development and harmony to this upcountry region. Should southern Sinhalese politics cause the government to implode, however, the resulting political turmoil -- not to mention any potential national election -- will disrupt and impede the governance efforts at the local level. End Comment.

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